

VZCZCXRO7451  
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV  
DE RUEHTU #0356/01 1001225  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 091225Z APR 08  
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4756  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000356

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/07/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [PHUM](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: FM ON ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT, AUSTRIAN KIDNAPPING,  
2009 BEN ALI CANDIDACY

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

-----  
SUMMARY  
-----

¶1. (C) During an April 8 meeting, Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah told the Ambassador that little of note had occurred at the March Arab League Summit in Damascus. While President Ben Ali had ultimately decided to attend, nothing could be accomplished in the absence of Saudi King Abdallah and Egyptian President Mubarak. On Iraq, Abdallah noted that Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari had an open invitation to visit Tunisia and that the Tunisian embassy in Baghdad remained open despite the security concerns. Turning to domestic issues, Abdallah said he doubted the two Austrian tourists were kidnapped in Tunisia in February. He agreed that more contact and exchange was needed between the GOT and USG on human rights issues. Abdallah said that while Ben Ali had not yet given any indication of his plans for the 2009 elections, he expected Ben Ali would announce his candidacy at this summer's ruling party congress. End Summary.

-----  
ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT: ALL ON TV  
-----

¶2. (C) The Ambassador began the meeting by pressing Abdallah to explain President Ben Ali's attendance at the Arab League Summit in Damascus, noting that Ben Ali had told A/S Welch in February that he would not attend. Abdallah replied that Ben Ali had told Welch he "probably" was not going, but had reconsidered later. Abdallah said he himself had expected Ben Ali would not go, but that Ben Ali usually attended Arab League summits, with the exception of Khartoum in 2006 and Riyadh in 2007. He said there was no particular reason that Ben Ali decided to go to Damascus, but added that Assad had attended the 2004 AL Summit in Tunis and that Tunisia had good relations with Syria.

¶3. (C) Abdallah opined that nothing of note had occurred during the Summit. The Ambassador reiterated US concerns about the summit and Syria, and Abdallah emphasized again that nothing significant had happened, including on the issue of Lebanon. "There were no secret discussions," he said, noting everything was televised. Given the lower level representation of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, there could be little real discussion of the key regional issues. Abdallah said he was not optimistic about the prospects for success on the Palestinian issue, given the Fatah-Hamas impasse. As Mahmoud Abbas had met Ben Ali in Damascus, the former was not planning to visit Tunisia in the near future.

¶4. (C) Bringing up Iraq, Abdallah said he felt the Iraqis had exaggerated the security situation "a bit" in Damascus, and asked for Arab support. When AL SYG Moussa had pressed

for details on what the Iraqis wanted, Abdallah said the main request was diplomatic presence in Baghdad. The Tunisian embassy remains open, despite the security environment, including JAM presence in the surrounding areas. The Ambassador noted the importance of Tunisia's diplomatic presence, and asked if the GOT would welcome a visit by FM Zebari. Abdallah said that Zebari had an open invitation to visit Tunisia, but that the GOI had never pursued the matter. (Note: Ambassador will convey this to the Iraqi Ambassador here.) The Ambassador noted the United States would welcome a visit by Abdallah to Iraq. Abdallah said he had never been there, but gave no indication he would take up the offer.

-----  
TERRORISM, AND HUMAN RIGHTS  
-----

15. (C) Turning to domestic issues, the Ambassador told Abdallah that the USG was prepared to offer any necessary support related to the February kidnapping of two Austrian tourists. Abdallah said he was 99 percent certain the two had not been kidnapped on Tunisian soil. Contradicting the views of our GOT interlocutors in the security services, he stated that the southern desert regions are easy to surveil, given the flat terrain.

16. (C) The Ambassador used the recent release of the Human Rights report to encourage the GOT to have an active dialogue on human rights with the USG. Abdallah agreed that dialogue was important, but said that the GOT had to overcome its "psychological" resistance. He said the GOT used to feel the USG was not receptive to an exchange of information, but that he hoped the GOT could overcome its reluctance.

TUNIS 00000356 002 OF 002

-----  
2009 ELECTIONS  
-----

17. (C) Abdallah concluded by explaining how busy he had been of late. He added that, as a member of the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party political bureau, he had additional responsibilities in the lead up to the RCD congress in the summer. The Ambassador asked if President Ben Ali would announce his 2009 candidacy at the congress. Abdallah said that is usually the occasion, but added that even in private Ben Ali had given no indication of his intentions. In 2004, Ben Ali had also not indicated his decision prior to the Congress.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm> fm  
GODEC